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David’s Lament for Sha’ul and Y’honatan
Second Samuel 1: 17-27

David’s lament for Sha’ul and Y’honatan DIG: For what purpose did David compose and teach this lament for Sha’ul and Y’honatan? What were the qualities or achievements of Sha’ul that David highlighted in this lament? Why does David call for censorship in Gath and Ashkelon (First Samuel 31:8-10)? Likewise, why does David curse Gilboa? What kind of warriors were Sha’ul and Y’honatan? What does this lament reveal about the friendship of David and Y’honatan? What can you tell about how David treats his enemies? His friends? In what ways should a Messianic congregation or church celebrate its leaders, especially its rabbis and pastors?

REFLECT: What worst enemy and best friend can you begin treating the way David treated Sha’ul and Y’honatan? What would God say about your heart? What is holding you back from doing this? How could you overcome the hurdles involved and do this while they are still living? If you have experienced a death close to home recently, how might you creatively remember him or her? What can you say to those who are still living before they pass away, so you won’t have any regrets after they are gone?

1011 BC

The last time we hear about **Y’honatan** is when **he died** with **his father** and two brothers on the battlefield against **the Philistines**. The slaughter brought profound grief to **David**, launching a sorrowful **lament**, or a formal expression of grief or distress, which can be written, read, learned, practiced or repeated. It differs from the informal, spontaneous, immediate outbursts of grief that vomits out its feelings. The **lament** is an expression of *thoughtful* grief. The sorrows and wounds **God’s** people receive from their losses are not miraculously healed after a short time of emotional catharsis. The **lament**-form of the Bible assumes that our grief is deep and ongoing, and it invites us to enter the discipline of expressing that grief in words that convey our anguish, in images that picture our despair, and in written

prayers that verbalize despondency. It is a grief that takes its time.[191]

The Lament: David took up this lament concerning Sha'ul and his son Y'honatan when **he** was 29 years old**. And he ordered that the people of Y'hudah be taught this lament,** which became known as the song **of the bow. David** thus provided a vehicle by which **Isra'el** could continue mourning. **It** was **written in the Book of Jashar (Joshua 10:13)**, an early account commemorating great events in **Isra'el's** history perhaps written in poetic form, but since has been lost **(Second Samuel 1:17-18).**

But **David** also wanted **his** mighty warriors (**to see link click Ej – David's Mighty Warriors**) to know this sad song and to know it by heart. Because **he** intended to use it as part of their motivational military training. **Gilboa** would not be the last time **Isra'el** would fight **the Philistines** (see **Cn – David's Defeats the Philistines**) and **David** wanted **his** men to remember **Gilboa**, remember the disgrace, remember the tragedy, remember the pagan arrogance. **He** wanted them ready for the next time.

The same principle is at work in the state of **Isra'el** today. The **Isra'el** Armored Corps swear their oath of allegiance on top of the old fortress of Masada. It was a fortress west of the Dead Sea, where, in 72-72 AD, some 960 Jews held out against Flavius Silva's Roman army. After seven months of siege the Romans breached the fortress but were denied the pleasure of Jewish blood since the defenders had committed suicide in the night. Masada then stands as a symbol of courage, and **Israeli** troops today stand on its summit to swear their oath of allegiance, saying "Masada shall not fall again."[192]

David openly sang about the grandeur of **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan** and the enormous loss that **Isra'el** faced. It is difficult, if not impossible, for us to imagine the extent of **their** sorrow today. As we read the books of **Samuel**, we get so caught up in **Sha'ul's** chase of **David** that we might miss what **Sha'ul's** death meant to **Isra'el**. Even with **Samuel's** rejection of **Sha'ul**, **Sha'ul** was **the king**. Now **the king** and **the prince** had died. Something precious and vital in **Isra'el** was gone and would never return. **David**, in **his** ability to turn the rhetoric completely away from **himself**, made it possible for **Isra'el** to embrace the loss more fully.

Only **Isra'el** could understand what this loss meant. An outsider could never know. Outsiders must leave the family or a clan to its grief, because outsiders will always

get the wrong impression. **David** was sure that **the Philistines**, in particular, would not understand. Indeed, like the death of the Two Witnesses in the Great Tribulation (see the commentary on **Revelation Dm – The Resurrection of the Two Witnesses: The Third Sign of Jonah**), when **the Philistines** learned of the death of **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan (First Samuel 31:9)**, they would turn the occasion into joy and celebration. Indeed, **they cut off his head and stripped off his armor, and they sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to proclaim the news in the temple of their idols and among their people. They put his armor in the temple of their gods, the Ashtoreths, and fastened his body** and **his** severed **head to the wall of Beth Shan in the Temple of Dagon (Second Samuel 31:8-10; First Chronicles 10:8-10).** However, joy in response to the death of **their king,** and celebration in the face of **their** pain was unbearable to **them**. From the **Israelite** perspective, those uncircumcised outsiders were less than human.[193]

The First Strophe: Your pride and joy, O Isra'el, lies dead on the hills. How the mighty have fallen, repeated in each strophe and therefore central to **the lament**, emphasizes the greatness of **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan** even after defeat and death **(Second Samuel 1:20 NLT).** Like the "Hall of Faith" in **Hebrews 11**, there is nothing recorded in the song that remembers any sins or mistakes in **their** lives.[194] **Tell it not in Gath,** their capital city, or **proclaim it not in the streets of Ashkelon,** the chief religious center where people would give thanks to their idols for helping **their** army defeat **Isra'el, lest the daughters of the uncircumcised rejoice (Second Samuel 1:20). David** could picture the welcome home, with **the women** singing and dancing in praise of the victors in the same way that the **Israelite** women had welcomed **him** after the defeat of Goliath **(First Samuel 18:7)**. That the uncircumcised would rejoice over the death of **Isra'el's king** was too painful for **David to** contemplate.[195]

Even though **Sha'ul** had tried to track **David** down and kill **him** for years, **David** did not celebrate **Sha'ul's** death. In fact, **David** took up **a lament** (Hebrew: *hakkinah*, meaning *to protect* or *to shelter*) concerning **Sha'ul**. **He** had no sense of bitterness. Why? Because **David** believed the best of **Sha'ul**. Once again, why? Because **David** had a **heart** that was like **God's heart**. When **Samuel** the prophet had first picked **him** out from among his six brothers, **ADONAI testified concerning him, " I have found David son of Jesse, a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22a).**

The poem recalls that it was in the great battle on **the mountain** range of **Gilboa** that death came to **Isra'el**. Those **mountains** were held accountable and placed under a curse. The **death** of **ADONAI's anointed** had contaminated **them** and **they** were then defiled. **Mountains of Gilboa, may you have neither dew nor rain** in the summer**, and may showers** not **fall on your terraced fields** in the winter**. For there the shield of the mighty was despised, the shield of Sha'ul – no longer rubbed with oil (Second Samuel 1:21).** What **David** could not have brought **himself** to say about **the king**, **he** can say about **the shield**.

The memories of **Y'honatan** and **Sha'ul** at the height of **their** powers came flooding back. **From the blood of the slain, from the flesh of the mighty, the bow of Y'honatan did not turn back, the sword of Sha'ul did not return unsatisfied.** We see the two together, **father** and **son**, treasured in **Isra'el**, valiant warriors. The poetry of grief looks past the rage of **the father** and the deception of **the son**. Those tensions are not important anymore. **Sha'ul and Y'honatan in life they were loved and admired, and in death they were not separated. Death** has a way of permitting us to focus on the larger issues in our lives, to transcend the details of hurt and affront.

Together **they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions (Second Samuel 1:22-23).** To **David**, these men weren't just great soldiers; **they** were also gracious people who were loved in life – and in death were loyal to each other and the people of **Isra'el**. From **his** meeting with **Samuel** at Endor (see **Bv – Sha'ul and the Medium at Endor**), **Sha'ul** knew that **he** and **his sons** would die the next day in battle, yet **he** entered the fray determined to do **his** best. **Y'honatan** knew that **his father** had disobeyed **YHVH** and sinned against **David**, yet **he** stayed at **his** side until the end. Even though the army of **Isra'el** was defeated, **David** wanted the people to remember the greatness of their **king** and **his sons**.[196]

Daughters of Isra'el, perhaps professional mourners, were invited to grieve, just as **the daughters of the Philistines (Second Samuel 1:20)** were prohibited from grieving.[197] **Weep for Sha'ul, who clothed you in scarlet and finery, who adorned your garments with ornaments of gold (Second Samuel 1:24).** The rich and affluent of **Isra'el** who thought it was beneath them to show any display of public mourning were required to join the common people in **their** grief.

The Second Strophe: David now speaks directly to **Y'honatan**: **How the mighty have fallen in the heat of battle, Y'honatan lies slain on your heights!** For the first time **David** speaks in the first person: **I grieve for you, Y'honatan.** While **David** had called on others to weep for **Sha'ul**, **he** was consumed with grief for **my brother; you meant so much to me! David** had never experienced such **love**, such devotion, that **Y'honatan** had shown him. **He** did not have to spell it out, for everyone knew that **Y'honatan**, heir to the throne, had not demanded **his** rights, but had voluntarily surrendered them in favor of **David**, whom **he** had protected and encouraged through the years. And this renunciation had been no impulsive act, but an ongoing generous attitude of heart and mind: **Y'honatan** had allowed **his** own interests to be disregarded so that **David's** could prosper (see **An – David and Y'honatan's Friendship**). True, **David** had found **love** from the **women** in **his** life, **his** mother and **his** wives, but even their **love** was not to be compared with **the love** that motivated **Y'honatan**. **His** selfless, transparent goodness had not looked for reward, and hence we read of **David's** heartfelt praise for **his** fallen **brother,** "**Your love for me was deeper than the love of women" (Second Samuel 1:25-26).**[198] **Y'honatan** was about 54 at the time and **David** was 29.

The Third Strophe: David had spoken to **Y'honatan**, but now **he** must face reality: **How the mighty have fallen.** The battle was over, **and the weapons of war** had **perished (Second Samuel 1:27).** For all **David** knew, **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan** were still laying alone on the war-torn slopes of **Gilboa**, **their** weapons lying useless beside **them**. The **lament** brings to an end the account of **Sha'ul's** reign, but at the same time marks the beginning of **David's** Kingdom.

David ordered **the people of Judah be taught this lament** for **Sha'ul** and **Y'honatan**, and **God** commanded Moshe to write down a song and teach it to Israelites (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Er – The Song of Moses**). Apparently the epic hymns of **Isra'el's** history were intended to be taught and applied from generation to generation. **David's lament** may well have been a favorite if First Maccabees 9:21 is any indication. There we read that the

lamentation for the slain Judas Maccabeus, leader of the Jewish rebellion against their Seleucid overlords, began with these words: **How the mighty have fallen**![199]